Localization as a means of translating. Experience in translating Neil Simon's

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The relationship between culture and translation has long been a topic of discussion. Many will agree that in translating a text, culture should always be considered as the wider context, and translating texts with cultural-specific components from one culture into another is not an easy task. As Jin Di and E. A. Nida put it: "Difference of culture may in many respects be even more of a problem for translators than differences of language".[1]

I should not go too far into the discussion on the relationship between language and culture, nor should I try too ambitiously to analyze the many different methods of translating cultures. My emphasis is on the device of *localization* in translating. By localization, I mean the use of components familiar to the receptor culture to substitute for components peculiar to the original culture in translating a text. The experience is drawn from my translating American playwright Neil Simon's situation comedy *Come Blow Your Horn* for the Cantonese stage in Hong Kong.[2] That this text is chosen as the basis for our discussion does not necessarily mean that localization is applicable only to dramatic texts. It is chosen because it serves to highlight the features of the method that I may like to bring up.

Neil Simon is famous for showing the interaction between the different characters in amusing situations. But the situations exploited in his plays are so similar to the everyday life of the Americans that the jokes produced are in fact highly cultural-specific, implying that those who belong to a different culture may find the plays quite meaningless.

In staging *Come Blow Your Horn* for the Hong Kong Cantonese, the above problem also occurs. The play is set in an apartment in the East Sixties of New York city. The characters are: Mr. and Mrs. Baker, their sons Alan and Buddy, Alan's lady friends Peggy and Connie. The East Sixties apartment is Alan's apartment, he has moved out and lives on his own although he still works in his father's company.

To the New Yorkers, the East Sixties is a place for the middle-upper class, but to the general Hong Kong audience, this will mean nothing more than a name. As the meaning and the effect of the lines are heavily depended on the audience's knowledge of the background, when the play was presented in 1984 in Hong Kong, a new setting for the play was designed to let the Hong Kong audience have an easy comprehension of the play. This change was further justified by the director's view that the purpose of the performance was not to introduce to the Hong Kong audience the American culture, but to highlight the theme concerning family ties and the development of a man into maturity. The aim of the translation was then set at reproducing a comedy for the local people, and a total adaptation was agreed. Effort was made to keep as far as possible the effect —here I may like to excuse myself from the debate of the problematic topic of *equivalent effect*— that was produced by the original *as perceived by the translator*. Some may argue that this attitude may lead to an unfaithful translation of the original, or as Patrice Pavis puts it, "...total adaptation to the target culture... can betray a condescending attitude to the source text and culture".[3] This is of course true, but to different degrees in different translation situations with different goals to achieve. And as there is not a direct and essential relationship between the translation and the original, while the translation can be a faithful reflection of the original, it can also be a highlighting of aspects chosen by the translator. All in all, as the translator is the creator of the target language text, the translator should be allowed a free hand to shape the translation.[4]

In translating *Come Blow Your Horn* into Cantonese, since the method of total adaptation was agreed, both the original and the translation to be produced were considered as an organic and dynamic whole. Every part of the play was seen related to some other parts of the play, and the setting in the context of the relevant culture. This point was highlighted because as the general setting was changed to suit the receptor culture, the audience would naturally prepare themselves to receive the play from the target culture's point of view. Therefore any parts, big or small, that were considered deviated from or contradictory to the norms of the target culture would be rejected by the audience. In fact in the application of the localization method, the uniformity of cultural colour may need some attention. Take for an example, in translating the following lines of Celia's in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Act. III, Sc. II,

> Therefore Heaven Nature charg'd
> That one body should be fill'd
> With all graces wide-enlarg'd.
> Nature presently distill'd
> Helen's cheek, but not her heart,
> Cleopatra's majesty,
> Atalanta's better part,

> Sad Lucretia's modesty.
> Thus Rosalind of many parts
> By heavenly synod was devis'd,
> Of many faces, eyes, and hearts
> To have the touches dearest priz'd.
> Heaven would that she these gifts should have,
> And I to live and die her slave.

a translator may be tempted to replace Helen, Cleopatra, Atalanta and Lucretia with the four beauties in the Chinese history —*Xi Shi, Wang Zhaojun, Diao Chan* and *Yang Yuhuan.* Whether these Chinese beauties have the same kind of beauty as the four Western beauties is another question, but if the setting of the play is not changed accordingly, the audience may start to wonder why Celia knows so much about the Chinese history, and there is a danger that the translation may become an unconvincing mix of cultures.

Let us go back to the Cantonese version of *Come Blow Your Horn.* The new setting of the play is an apartment in Shatin, Hong Kong, which many young professionals would choose in the 80's. The portrayal of characters are slightly modified to suit the target culture, say, the father is made more stubborn and the mother more caring and garrulous, typical of Chinese parents in general. These features are reflected not only in the dialogues, but also in the attires, movements and even in the gestures and the facial expressions.[5]

The play begins as follows:

> At rise: ALAN BAKER, in a short Italian suede ski jacket is standing in the doorway being charming, persuasive and doing his best in attempting to lure PEGGY EVANS into his bachelor apartment. PEGGY is in a ski outfit that fits her so snugly it leaves little room for skiing. ALAN puts down his valise, then slides PEGGY'S over-night bag out of her hand without her even noticing it and places it on the floor. ALAN is very adept at this game. Being good-looking, bright, thirty-three and single against PEGGY'S twenty-two years of blissful ignorance and eagerness to please, it appears that ALAN has all the marbles stacked on his side.

It is suggested that Alan and Peggy have spent the weekend skiing. But skiing is hardly a popular sport in Hong Kong because in Hong Kong it does not snow. So spending a weekend skiing sounds very odd to the Hong Kong audience.

In the Cantonese version, skiing has been changed to wind-surfing. It was chosen to replace skiing because it was a sport that appealed to many young professionals of Hong Kong in the 80's. The change is reflected in the dialogues, as well as in the attires of Alan and Peggy in the opening scene. Instead of being dressed in *Italian suede ski jacket* and *a ski outfit*, they are dressed in summer sports clothes.

Skiing is also the subject frequently referred to in other jokes in the play. One example is that to characterize Peggy as an ignorant and simple-minded girl who refuses to remember too many details, she is always confused with names, so the moment she is back from the ski lodge with Alan to his apartment, she has already forgotten where they have been to spend the weekend:

> ALAN: *(Taking bottle out of carton)* It was a ski lodge.
> PEGGY: Was it? Anyway, it was nice. I've never been to New Hamsphire before.
> ALAN: It was Vermont.
> PEGGY: Oh. I'm terrible with names...[6]

As skiing no longer exists in the Cantonese version, *ski lodge* is changed to *dujia jiudian* (holiday resort), *New Hamsphire* and *Vermont* are replaced with *Dalang Wan* (Big Wave Bay) and *Xi Sha Wan* (West Sand Bay), where wind-surfing is usually held. And there is actually a holiday resort in West Sand Bay. These places are chosen to maintain the verisimilitude as created in the original. The same consideration has been taken into account in translating the following lines in Act Three:

> MOTHER: Don't think I'm not ashamed. A woman of my age running away from home. I was so humiliated. A woman from my building saw me in the subway with the suitcase. I had to lie to her. I said I was going to visit my brother in California. Then at 125th Street I had to change to a local to come here. She's not dumb. For California you don't change at 125th Street. I should worry. My life is over anyway.
> ALAN: Why, Mom? What happened?
> MOTHER: What happened? Ask America what happened? In Alaska they must have heard how that man has been carrying on with me. For three weeks now. Three weeks.[7]

The above situation is adapted to the target culture and for a foreigner who does not know much about Hong Kong, the lines in Cantonese are not funny at all, which is quite similar to the response of the general Hong Kong audience to the original. The situations exploited in the Cantonese version are related to the traffic and politics of Hong Kong. *Jiulong Tang* (Kowloon Tong) and *Aomen* (Macau) are used to replace *125th Street* and *California* respectively. These are names almost everyone in Hong Kong will know because Kowloon Tong is a major underground train station for transfers and the underground train has become the major mode of transport in Hong Kong since it was built in the late 70's, and Macau is the Portuguese colony one hour away by sea from Hong Kong, where many Hong Kong people will spend their holiday. *Qu Yihui* (District Board) is the substitute for *America* and *Alaska*. The District Boards are district councils of Hong Kong. When the Representative Government system was introduced to Hong Kong in the early 80's, the district boards were promoted as the all-round council in the district, but in fact the general view of the Hong Kong people is that the district boards

as political establishments are quite handicapped. So the joke is used to tease the political incapability of the boards. This joke does deviate from the original, but the comic effect is maintained and the local touch is enhanced.

All along, we have been talking about the effect of the physical background on the play and the audience, but time is also a factor that is worth mentioning, because when time changes norms change too. This change will definitely and directly affect the audience's reception of the play. If the play is put on the Cantonese stage now in 1994, the setting might have to be changed to another area, since after years of development Shatin of Hong Kong has become a very crowded residential area and does not reflect the taste of the middle-upper class as it did in the early 80's.

In addition, details like wind-surfing might have to be changed to something else, maybe golf; District Board can be changed to Hong Kong Affairs Consultants, pro-China politicians appointed by the Chinese government, who are seen acting against the still legitimate British Hong Kong government and many of whom are tipped to replace the present legislators after 1997. This kind of adjustments have actually been done before in different performances of the play carried out in different time. For example in Act Three, the father and the sons have a showdown and the stubborn and overacting father states that he is going to sell his business since his sons are no good assistants to him:

> ALAN: Why are you selling it?
> FATHER: Who should I save it for, his children?
> BUDDY: But who did you sell it to, Dad?
> FATHER: Who? To Chiang Kai-shek. That's why I'm going to China.

The mentioning of Chiang Kai-shek and China did, I think, produce an absurd and comic effect to audience of the original in the 60's, but definitely not to the audience of the 80's. In the 1984 Cantonese version, Chiang is changed to Marcos, and China the Philippines. When the play was staged in 1992, the above names were replaced with Saddam Hussein and Iraq.

Localization is one of the many methods of translating. Like other methods, if it is used with caution it will be an effective means. In the application of the method, care should be taken to check if the translation will become an undesirable mix of different or contradictory cultures. With a comprehensive understanding of the original text and culture, the target text and culture, and more importantly, the purpose of the translating, it will be a very effective means to bridge the cultural gap between the original and the translation.

NOTES

1. Jin, D.; Nida, E. A. (1984) *On Translation.* Beijing: China Translation and Publishing Corporation, p. 78.
2. The Cantonese version was first presented in June 1984 by the company *The Actor* at the City Hall Theatre, Hong Kong. It was then presented twice by the *Horizonte* in June 1988 and Seplember 1992.
3. Pavis, P. (1989) «Problems of Translating for the Stage», in *The Play out of Context,* Scolnicov, H.; Holland, P. (ed), Cambrige: CUP, p. 38.
4. The arguments are raised in my previous article «The Role of the Translator in the Process of Translating», in *Conference Proceedings -the Thirteenth Conference of the Interpreter Translator Educators' Association of Australia, Adelaide, 1990.*
5. Much has been discussed about all these in Bassnett, S. (1991) *Translation Studies.* London: Routledge, p. 120-132.
6. The Cantonese translation is:

   嗰間係渡假酒店。
   係咩？冇所謂啦，嗰度幾好。我以前從未去過大浪灣。
   係西沙灣。
   噢，我最怕記名。

7. The Cantonese translation is:

   你以為我好想咁咩？咁大個人重要離家出走，都唔知幾醜。
   隔籬個師奶喺地鐵見倒我攞住個大嗯，我就呃佢，話過澳門
   探你舅父，跟住我就喺九龍塘轉火車。你估佢傻㗎，去澳門
   點會喺九龍塘轉火車。算啦，算啦，我呢世都冇面見人㗎喇。
   阿媽，有乜嘢事啫？
   乜嘢事？去問區議會啦。連區議會都知道佢點對我㗎喇。成
   3個禮拜啦，3個禮拜啦。

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